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ABSTRACT

Three "bugaboos" frighten schools to the degree that they do not use common sense to implement values education curricula in the public schools. These bugaboos are the problematic issues of prayer, piety, and pluralism. They are not necessarily barriers. School administrators and boards of education should inform themselves so they will be able to avoid their problematic aspects when developing values education programs. Common sense suggests that any human society must teach values to children. Schools cannot avoid transmitting values to students. The "how to" of moral education, though, often requires more than common sense. Direct instruction in what the school views as right and wrong, including the value dimensions of the hidden curriculum, will work only if a relationship of mutual respect exists between a school and its students. Self-image is a key to moral development. Citizenship education should be based on instruction in history and, to some extent, philosophy, and not on the obsolete and ineffective standard civics course. Perhaps the most useful contribution public schools could make to the religious development of young people is to teach them some epistemology, which would help them understand that many different kinds of truth exist and are important, and that schools are limited in their ability to address certain truths. (RH)

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VALUES EDUCATION: COMMON SENSE AND BUGABOOS

by David S. Seeley

Perhaps some of you have read the current best seller, Cultural Literacy by E.D. Hirsch, and had the same reaction I had: Why should it take such effort to elucidate the obvious, common sense proposition that our children should actually learn some history, English, math, science, etc. in our schools, rather than just presumed "skills" without content?

As it turns out, sadly enough, there are reasons why this obvious truth has to be argued for in regard to the academic education.

I find a somewhat similar situation in values or moral education. It should be obvious that children need values education. This would be true in any human society, but it is particularly true in a democratic society, This is only common sense. And yet there are reasons why we have to argue for this obvious common sense.

The reasons we have to argue for common sense in moral education are somewhat different from those in academic education. To argue for the value of teaching kids history, science and literature, Prof. Hirsch had to argue against a bevy of bogus bromides that have masqueraded as "educational theory" and diverted educators from common sense for many decades. This is a very interesting story, but not the story I want to tell here.

In moral education also there are also a number of dubious theories which have helped to lead educators astray, and you can certainly hear about them, usually in caricature, from angry critics who rail against "permissiveness," "moral relativism," and "value neutrality" in the public schools.

I want to address a different reason as to why educators are diverted from common sense. You might call it the "Bugaboo Theory."

Many people assume that moral education in our schools is in such dreadful shape because of the inherent difficulties of the problem--that it's just very hard to figure out how to help young people become well-behaved, responsible citizens in today's benighted world. There are, indeed, real difficulties in figuring out the "how's" of values education in modern society, and they no doubt do inhibit schools' efforts. I'll discuss

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some of these difficulties later, in terms of the "uncommon" sense we sometimes need for figuring out the "how to's" of values education. But first we have to clear a path for common sense on the main substance of the need for values education. What I want to draw attention to is that many school systems don't even get to the "how to's" of values education because they don't squarely face the question of why it's important in the first place. They are scared away from the whole issue by some bugaboos.

BUGABOOS

The three particular bugaboos I wish to discuss are PRAYER, PIETY, AND PLURALISM.

They are, of course, related. But they are also different. They do not have fully overlapping constituencies, and they often operate in quite different ways in the political and legal machinery of public education. Nevertheless, they have a combined impact--a very unfortunate impact of spooking many school boards and educators into a state of catatonic paralysis when it comes to values education. They prevent school boards and officials from using their common sense.

Let me make clear that I am not trying to denigrate any of these three issues by saying they operate as "bugaboos." On the contrary, they have their unfortunate bugaboo effect exactly because they represent real and important values and issues: on the one hand legitimate and heartfelt concern about the moral and religious upbringing of our children, and on the other legitimate concerns about what is proper and appropriate in the public schools operating under our democratic, constitutional system.

It is important to try to understand these issues and to deal with them sensitively and wisely. Otherwise, they are likely to operate as even bigger bugaboos--shapeless specters that rise up to spook us whenever we try to deal with the question of values in our schools. They are troublesome issues, but they have their boundaries, and if we deal with them in a fair and sensible way, they need not block us from using our common sense on values education.

PRAYER presents perhaps the most straight forward problem. Many Americans, including at the moment our President, believe that prayer in the schools is essential to proper moral development. They point out that prayer was common--well-nigh universal--in schools for over three hundred years of American history, including most of period the First Amendment has been in effect. And they suspect that the downward spirals in public and private morality are directly related to "taking God out of the classroom."

Yet, unless the law changes drastically, prayer will not come back into public schools. So we have a whole constituency of people out there who feel they are being deprived of a very important element in their children's education. Yes, of course, they can send their children to private schools if they can afford it, where they can pray to their heart's content. But that does not remove their sense of outrage and deprivation of being blocked from doing what seems to them a simple, traditional thing in their own public schools--even when a majority of their fellow citizens agree with them in wanting it.

So we should try to respect this concern, and do something about it if we can. Unfortunately, one of ways some people try to do something about it arouses another one of our bugaboos. They accept the prohibition of prayer in public schools--either because they agree with the wisdom of avoiding governmentally prescribed prayers, or because they see no prospects of changing the law on this. They look, however, for some other way to get religious orientation into the schools.

This issue is a little more complicated than prayer. The Supreme Court, while plainly proscribing prayer, has said that the study of religion is not prohibited. Many hope, therefore, that the schools, while avoiding prayer, can nevertheless provide some of that religious orientation they feel has been the backbone of American character.

The problem is that what is wanted it clearly more than just the "study" of religion. Jerry Falwell quotes Luther's fear that "schools will prove to be the great gates of hell unless they diligently labor in explaining the holy Scriptures, engraving them in the hearts of youth. I advise no one to place his child where the Scriptures do not reign paramount. Every institution in which men are not unceasingly occupied with the Word of God must become corrupt." Falwell tells of how in the good old days "parents did not have to worry about the education of their children," and how he "gained a respect for God, the Bible, the church, and for things that were holy," all in the public school he attended in Virginia.

For most of this constituency, furthermore, it is clear that it is not just any religion, but a particular religion, which is needed to save our children from perdition. Senator Jesse Helms says that, "It is hardly coincidence that the banishment of the Lord from the public schools has resulted in their being taken over by a totally secularist philosophy. Christianity has been driven out, In its place has been enshrined a permissiveness in which the drug culture has flourished, as have pornography, crime, and fornication--in short, everything but discipline and learning."

So I call this element of our problem not just "religion" which could be studied, but "PIETY"--in other words, not just knowledge about religion, but reverence for God and religion, and usually a particular religion. The lunatic fringe of this movement is easy to disparage, but the underlying concern is not so easily dismissed. The secular "study" of religion not only may not instill those "habits of the heart" many parents want, but may actually undermine a child's religious orientation.

Nevertheless, piety of course is just as problematical as prayer in public schools. Those who are concerned about religion, and who think they can get around the prohibition against prayer and find some other way to promote piety, run right into the same tangled web of problems. I don't belittle this concern for piety; in fact I share it and will later suggest a way I think public schools could address it constructively without running afoul of the Constitution. Nevertheless, most of the efforts to promote piety in public schools are clearly unconstitutional.

They also arouse our third bugaboo, PLURALISM. I don't have to dwell on the problem of pluralism, since we are all familiar with its basic outlines. What I want to bring out is the way in which this issue interacts with the others in frightening schools away from common sense on values education. What should be perfectly clear is that the more some groups clamor for prayer and piety in the public schools, the more obvious it is that we can't have them--not in America, and not in American public schools. The very fervor with which they are promoted is all the indication we need of their fatal sectarianism so far as being acceptable common ground for the public schools in a highly pluralistic nation.

It may seem paradoxical that the more people want something, the less appropriate is their getting it. But that is the way it has to be in a pluralistic country that wants to respect the right of people to be different. Pluralism with peace means respecting people's right not to be subjected to the values of any one group, no matter how fervent, righteous, or politically potent. The fervor of any particular group has to contend with an equal, opposite, and equally traditional American value that says, "Don't tread on me."

Pluralism, in addition to helping to enhance the controversies over prayer and piety, also creates its own bugaboos that frighten people away from values education. As soon as someone suggests any particular steps in the way of values education, you can be sure that someone else will cry out that we are trying to "indoctrinate" or "impose values" on children. "Indoctrinating" or "imposing values" is very frowned upon in our society, and is supposedly a violation of the sacred values of "pluralism." This is especially so if the values are "elite," "upperclass," or, heaven forbid, "middle class."

Or perhaps the charge will be that "adults are trying to impose their values on children," which also is apparently considered a crime against democracy. This bugaboo is not of recent origin either. The progressive education movement as early as the turn of the last century complained about the evils of "traditional education," which, according to John Dewey's description, "imposes adult standards . . . upon those who are only growing toward maturity."

My purpose in bringing up these familiar issues is not to try to resolve them, or even to discuss the important and interesting legal and policy concerns that must be addressed in dealing with them wisely. My purpose is to say that because these important issues lie festering out there, unresolved, and really unresolvable in any clean and final way, they operate as "bugaboos" to scare people away from values education altogether.

Pity the poor school superintendents or school board members as they consider doing something about values education. They can be sure they will run into a hornets' nest of emotional and volatile controversy. They know they cannot satisfy the most ardent advocates of prayer and piety, and they have to worry that anything they do will be attacked from the other side as a violation of pluralism, a substitute for prayer or a subterfuge for sneeking religion into the curriculum. They tend to be frightened away, therefore, from the substance of values education.

What can and should be done about this? If I could change my metaphor a bit, I suggest that in charting a course for values education in public schools, we might look at prayer, piety and pluralism as rocky shoals which could sink our ship, but which nevertheless need not be crashed into. It is well to respect rocky shoals, just as we should respect the issues involved in our bugaboos, but if we are so scared of them that we fail to leave the harbor, then we surely will not get anywhere. Let's know as much as possible about these bugaboos, and know exactly where they are on the chart, and then chart a course between them so that we can get somewhere on the important task of values education.

Having said that, then where should we try to sail? Here is where I would like to come back to common sense about what we need to do, and them perhaps a little uncommon sense on how to do it.

COMMON SENSE

It should be the most obvious common sense that any human society must teach its children values. Unlike other animals whose behavior is governed to a large extent by instinct--inherited and built in programing that determines behavior--human beings must learn a vast array of appropriate behavior after birth. And much of what they have to learn is normative, i.e. what they should do in various circumstances--in other words, values.

Some might say, that's all very well--indeed obvious, but why the schools? Shouldn't all this be learned in the home, as in the good old days?

I take issue with those who suggest that the immediate family has been the prime vehicle for transmitting social values in most human societies. The family is very important, but once children are much above a year old, they begin to pick up values from a broader social context than just their immediate families. In modern society a good piece of that broader context is the culture of the school. So the schools cannot avoid an important responsibility in helping to teach values. It's just common sense.

There's a further bit of common sense that most people can agree with if they're not bamboozled by our various bugaboos: Whatever is true about the need for moral education in human societies in general is especially true of democratic societies, where people have to learn to be "self-governing" rather than governed from above. This means that each individual has far more responsibility for moral behavior than in societies where most of their behavior is governed by others.

As emphasized in the "Education for Democracy" statement recently sponsored by the AFT, Freedom House, and the Educational Excellence Network, "it is absurd to argue that the state, or its schools, cannot be concerned with citizens' ability to tell right from wrong, and to prefer one over the other."

Democratic society requires not only more moral citizens than non-democratic societies, but also citizens who are loyal to the democratic values that sustain their freedom.

Those of us who watched with horror recently as millions of Americans idolized Colonel North for his bravery and patriotism, have a feeling in the pit of our stomachs that values is what a democratic society is all about. Without solid democratic values written into the hearts of its citizens, it will collapse like a house of cards, even if the words of the Constitution are written on every card.

If we want to reach back a little further for something to remind us, a recent letter to the New York Times reported an interview with Mussolini in 1937 in which the founder of modern fascism "predicted the ultimate 'Fascistization' of the whole world, including the democracies he hated." Asked how this would come about, Mussolini is reported to have replied, "It will happen as a result of internal pressures everywhere to combat Communism."

It's just common sense that we have to teach our children democratic values, if we want to preserve a democratic society. The fact that we're a pluralistic society makes it all the more imperative for all its members to gain a set of values that will allow them to live and work in peace with one another. Pluralism is a reason for values education, not against it.

UNCOMMON SENSE

But how to do it? Here is where we sometimes need some "uncommon sense." It may seem like common sense, if you want to teach children good behavior, to tell them what is "good" and "bad"; if you want good citizens, to teach "citizenship"; and if you want children to be religious, to teach them religion. But in the "how's" of moral education what seems like common sense can often be more complicated. Let me give only a few examples.

With regard to just plain good behavior--consideration for other people, honesty, etc.--direct teaching of what's right and wrong may play a more complicated role than common sense would indicate. At first blush, many people assume that such direct instruction is indeed a common sense remedy for our wayward children's apparent moral ignorance. "For God's sake, tell'em what's right and wrong," is the cry of concerned parents and citizens angered by educators who seem to be timid about "imposing values on children," or who indulge in waffly jargon about "values clarification." "Parents want the schools to tell the kids that lying and cheating are bad; why can't the schools just tell them this and make it clear?"

And yet, it doesn't take much sober reflection to realize that such direct moral instruction often doesn't get us very far with kids these days. They resist it like the plague. Sometimes it almost seems to have the reverse effect: Whatever grown-ups say is "bad" they decide is "good"--an inversion that is helped along by their confusing tendency to call things they like "bad," and things they really like, "real bad." So, many people who deal with children have developed their own "common sense" to the effect that preaching or lecturing about what is right and wrong is of no use.

But this bit of common sense may be misleading too. I found myself arguing in an article a few years ago that a school should declare its values, overtly as well as in its "hidden curriculum." It should make it clear to students what is expected of them and why, not only in terms of academic performance but in behavior. I guess that's a kind of direct teaching, and I would defend it if done in the right context. Even if the students groan and snicker when they hear these expectations, I suspect it can have more effect than they might admit or we might expect.

I'm not a psychologist, but if I read modern brain theory correctly, I suspect that helping children associate certain behaviors with "bad" and "good" could well help to guide behavior. It can be a way of helping children learn the moral wisdom of a culture in much the same way they learn that a glowing red stove is not only "hot" but "dangerous"—i.e. their minds present them not only with a cognitive abstraction, but with a value judgement that affects their behavior.

That there are problems in balancing such "imprinting" with the need also to develop critical thinking and to avoid unhealthy guilt, should not deter us from its proper use. These problems should just remind us again that the "how to's" of moral education often require us to go beyond simple common sense.

One of the complications in such direct communication from school to students as to what is right and wrong is that it is likely to be effective only if the relationship between school and students is itself right. There must be a relationship of mutual respect for it to work. If the school is simultaneously telling a child that he is stupid and worthless (which many schools in effect are doing to many children), then it should not surprise us if the school's message about what is right and wrong may not register—or may have a reverse effect. It is not hard to imagine that such a child might well reason that "if the people who tell me X is bad also think I'm bad, and I think I'm good, then maybe X is good too." For the youngster who takes the school's message about his worthlessness to heart, the situation may be even worse. He may well think, "This stuff about what's good and bad is only for good people; since I'm a bad person, it doesn't apply to me."

What this suggests among other things is that there is considerable overlap between moral education and just plain good education. The greatest contribution schools could make to good behavior may be to ensure that children are successful in their school work from the earliest grades. Self-image is a key to moral development, and when schools in effect teach thousands of children they are dummies, failures, and worthless, we shouldn't be too surprised that many of them begin to engage in self-destructive and anti-social behavior.

We have to realize that the world has changed and that while failure in school 100 years ago was no great blow to the ego, today it is. And the kids know it even if their elders don't. Students who are failing in school are not fooled by the schools' euphemisms about "individual differences" and "each child learning to his fullest potential."

Another aspect of the "hidden curriculum" that sends messages to kids is the basic structure of public education as it has developed over the past 100 years. I am convinced that the underlying structure of delegated authority, bureaucratic organization, and false professionalism that now pervades public education, puts students in a basically passive role, as the recipients of professional services, rather than as active participants in, and increasingly responsible for, their own development. This again is not at first obvious--and in fact is not understood by many educators socialized in the present structure. But it is a further example of how the reforms needed for moral education and for successful academic education coincide, for you can't produce either responsible citizens or successful students in a structure that makes students passive.

How to ensure that all children are active and successful learners is a whole other subject which won't be dealt with here. I'll only say that it is more possible than we might imagine, and is in fact crucial to any successful values education. I bring it up here not togo into the depth this issue deserves, but only to emphasize that the "how's" of moral education lead us again considerably beyond a few simple, common sense nostrums.

The same is true of the "how-to's" of citizenship education. It has seemed like common sense for schools to make their contribution to citizenship by teaching something called "civics," which mostly seems to focus on "how our government works." I certainly don't want to imply that schools shouldn't teach this. But our standard civics courses seem to have little effect in producing the desired behaviors of responsible citizenship. Students don't even seem to learn the facts they are told in civics classes in a way that sticks with them.

For effective citizenship education, I suspect that the "Education for Democracy" statement comes closer to the mark in saying that the study of history is "the chief subject in education for democracy"--history and to some extent philosophy--neither of which gets much attention in our schools at present.

This again suggests that "values education" to a large extent coincides with <u>good</u> education. It's a great mistake to think that citizenship education can just be a a thin veneer of information and precepts, when underlying it is a base of ignorance and intellectual sloth.

The Education for Democracy statement lists the following under "What The Citizen Needs to Know": "To understand our ideas requires a knowledge of the whole sweep of Western civilization, from the ancient Jews and Christians--whose ethical beliefs gave rise to democratic thought--to the Greeks and Romans, through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the Reformation, the English Revolution--so important to America--the eighteenth century Enlightenment, and the French Revolution, a violent cousin to our own."

That's a tall order. I'll bet most teachers, let alone students, haven't even heard of the "English Revolution." Yet the Education for Democracy statement, subscribed to by an array of American notables as varied as Walter Mondale, Cardinal O'Conner and Arthur Ashe, says that, "Such a curriculum is indispensable. Without it, our principles of government--and the debates over them ever since--are not fully comprehensible."

There is no cheap way out. If we're really concerned about citizenship education, we have to face up to the very poor base of solid education in history and ideas we are providing most of our future citizens.

And that's just on the cognitive side of citizenship education. As much or more has to be done on the affective and experiential side to produce good citizens. Participating as a responsible citizen in the school itself, as suggested in the new emphasis on school climate; and community service, as recommended by Ernest Boyer and others, probably have more to contribute to good citizenship education than most of the civics courses now being taught in our schools.

Let me lastly return to the question of religious instruction as another example of where the "how-to's" of values education may have to go beyond common sense. The problem of religion is at the heart of all three of our bugaboos, and common sense tells many people that the best way to make kids religious is to teach them religion--either through prayer (a sort of learning-by-doing) or by courses in religion.

But are prayer or courses in religion really the most effective way of helping children's religious development--especially as they might be implemented in a public school? Even if they were constitutional, I doubt if they would be effective. They do not seem to be very effective even in many parochial schools. They might, indeed, like some of our moral education efforts, have a reverse effect.

If you want a real example of uncommon sense, let me suggest that perhaps the most useful contribution public schools could make to the religious development of young people is to teach them some epistemology. That may really sound a litte too uncommon if not downright esoteric for public schools, but I'm not talking about anything very deep. I doubt if it would even be as daunting as the Education for Democracy's prescription to get all children to master the whole of Western Civilization. I'm just suggesting that public schools could do a better job of helping youngsters understand that there are many different kinds of "truth"--not only mathematical and scientific truth, and historical and sociological truth, but also artistic truth, literary truth, musical truth, and, yes, religious truth.

I think children could understand and accept it if a public school explained that it could not help them with many aspects of religious truth--that they will have to get that from their families and religious institutions. This would actually be a part of their citizenship education—to understand why we have a separation of church and state--but at the same time to understand that religion has been an important form of human meaning since the beginning of history, and is important today, even though some people exercise their religious freedom by denying religion and calling themselves athcists. It's just that the public school cannot deal with people's development in this area except by providing some intellectual tools and historical background to help them find their way.

Such an approach could help to defuse some of the controversy currently raging over "secular humanism." The charge that schools teach "secular humanism" as a religion is absurd, but that schools unwittingly have a secularist bias is not so absurd. The rationalistic bias of most school subjects even tends to devalue aesthetic truth as an important element of human meaning. By merely pointing out this bias, and helping students understand that there are other realms of meaning that are important to mankind—and helping them experience at least some of the others, such as art, music, poetry and good literature--schools can help to counteract their rationalist bias without teaching religion as such. And by doing so they may actually make a greater contribution to children's religious development than any amount of publicly prescribed prayer or attempts to teach religion in the public schools.

THE NEED FOR LEADERSHIP

Let me end by suggesting what should be clear from everything I have said so far: It will take considerable leadership to put us on the right track for values education—not only leadership from the education profession, but leadership from the community at large. The issues go beyond the specific expertise of educators, and educators are often too frightened to act without sound and responsible leadership from the community.

It will take leadership to help us sort out what can be answered with common sense and what requires careful thought that goes beyond common sense. It will take leadership to help us overcome our fears of the bugaboos of prayer, piety and pluralism, and steer a course around these knotty issues so we can produces a solid, substantive policy on moral education in public schools that is neither a substitute for prayer nor a subterfuge for sneeking religion into the curriculum.

The situation may look bleak at the moment for responsible leadership from the community in view of the emotional fanaticism that has built up around these issues. But in some ways we're better off than we were a few years ago when the issue of moral education was not even on the educational policy agenda. As recently as 1970, I found it necessary to say in a Saturday Review article that "educational circles have paid little attention . . . to what is assuredly an extremely important aspect of education: How can young people be brought up not only to know what they need to know but to have the strength of character, integrity, or whatever one wants to call it, that will enable them to function responsibly as adults? . . . . Not only is there a great paucity of ideas, even the structure and language to deal with the issue of character and what kind of education is needed to produce it seem to be lacking." We have come a long way since 1970, and if we haven't yet found that clear course to sail or the solid substance we're looking for, at least we have it on the agenda.

If educators and citizens work together on it, we should be able to come up with what our common sense tells us is imperative: providing excellent moral and civic education in our schools to match the excellent academic education now called for in the most important reform movement since the establishment of public education many decades ago.

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